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PROGRAMMES AND POLICIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

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LATIN AMERICAN PANEL

Presenter: Mr. Luis Busco Costa

Topic: Cooperation between neighbouring countries and bilateral agreements in border regions

In the past, Latin American countries have made great efforts to bring about genuine regional integration. These have normally been aimed at the economic sphere, but unfortunately in practice have not produced the results hoped for.

In the area of disasters, however, States can point to substantial progress, in cooperation, assistance, mutual aid and solidarity.

Being a huge region with difficult geography, permanently prey to phenomena which are often catastrophic, Latin America has learned from experience that agreements and treaties between neighbouring countries are best suited to tackling disasters that strike at common borders.

This has been clearly visible since the beginning of the 1980s, when two-nation and subregional agreements especially designed for border regions, where towns are affected by similar phenomena, were cemented.

At present, cooperation treaties and agreements on disaster prevention, mitigation and relief are in operation at different levels of development, involving exchanges of experience, information, monitoring, early warnings, training, emergency stocks, etc. There are also countries which, although having no formal, signed agreements with each other, do deal with these matters at the local level.

Signed agreements between Mexico and the United States, Mexico and Guatemala, among the Central American countries and between Colombia and Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, and Chile and Peru, to name but some, are now being applied. Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay have conducted joint activities in border towns in relation to flooding by rivers in the region.

The Treaty for Amazonian Cooperation and the Hipólito Unánue Convention, are wider-ranging instruments covering different areas of cooperation, but they also include the problem of disasters.

In brief, Latin America may be said to have made a lot of progress in this field over the past decade. This is due in part to efforts by international organizations working in the region and elsewhere which have supported and encouraged such relations.

In conclusion, recognizing that current efforts need to be consolidated and expanded, Latin America has shown that it is entirely possible to reach agreement and consensus among countries on this subject. The remaining years of IDNDR and thereafter offer a magnificent opportunity to build on such cooperation;

assistance from international agencies and donor countries will be crucial to the attainment of these objectives.

Notwithstanding the above, it is important that any agreement or treaty signed in the future, regionally or between countries, and whether economic, cultural, scientific or other, should specifically include the disaster element as another means of bringing about the sustainable development to which all nations aspire.

Presenter: Mrs. Norma Zepeda Valdez

Regional-level training

Little by little, the advent of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction has altered the situation of unpreparedness that prevailed at the beginning of the 1970s. Today the need for foresight, preparation and mitigation is increasingly evident. It is clear, however, that without well-trained human resources, laws, emergency plans and other efforts will not be enough.

Hence the outcome of the training initiatives launched in the region over the past decade has been of considerable significance.

Advances in this field mean that training efforts in all countries no longer influence just experts and professionals, but also political decision makers, secondary educational institutions and the community.

A body of regional and subregional regulations on disaster administration has developed, since the majority of professionals have attended various interactive training schemes with encouragement from such specialized agencies as OFDA, PAHO, OAS, CEPREDENAC, INSARAG, ICAP, IGAC and CISMID. Under a UNDP/DHA initiative, the United Nations is working on a programme for its officials commonly known as the Disaster Management Training Programme (DMTP) with support from PAHO and OAS.

Another important advance has been the periodic meetings held to enable professionals from different subregions to consider what progress has been made, and to identify solutions to common problems. These efforts have enabled full advantage to be taken of valuable experience and an exchange of information among experts in different disciplines.

Over the past few years training has extended to universities, a key sector for professional and cultural training in any social system; little by little the subject has been introduced at the undergraduate level in some institutions and at the postgraduate level in public health, medical and nursing schools; similar developments have taken place in social communications and education and, recently, in engineering and architecture.

School disaster-education curricula, introduced in the region in the 1980s and supported by UNESCO, national and international non-governmental organizations in Central and South America, ministries of education and emergency bodies, have yielded positive results.

The general public, as an active participant in efforts to deal with the problems it faces, has not entirely escaped disaster training: "community and university work programmes" and "research and action to promote local organization to handle emergency situations" are under way, with encouragement from PAHO and cooperation from Italy.

Lastly, although the level of human resource training related to disaster administration is considerably better than it was at the end of the 1970s, the current level of development and ever-increasing demand in the region force us to look to the future and consider what fresh efforts could continue to improve disaster training in the region.

Presenter: Mr. Fernando Guerrero

Efforts are being made in every country around the globe to optimize and make use of existing resources to prevent the natural disasters that threaten our people. States evidently need to be involved in funding such activities, and in making the public aware of the extent of natural risks and how to avoid them. A seven-point proposal is put forward, emphasizing the need for constant training in this area, for the natural disaster factor to be taken into account in the course of regular studies, for effective legal backing, and for reciprocal treaties. Reference is also made to the vital need for communication between politicians and parliaments, channelled through natural disaster committees that should be established in every country; and to the involvement of non-governmental organizations and the media in plans of action.

Presenter: Mr. Luis Diego Morales

Topic: Cooperation between regional scientific institutions

Advances in scientific knowledge and the frequency of various kinds of disaster in the region have strengthened perceptions of our physical and social vulnerability and, hence, of the imperative need for the constant transfers and interchanges that take place within the scientific community to be made accessible to disaster prevention and relief bodies and planners, so that information can be efficiently applied in the process of disaster reduction.

There is a long tradition of information-sharing among scientists which, little by little, has been extending to national and regional earth science associations, some of them active worldwide, and hence a formal scientific cooperation network has gradually grown up. In Latin America, the case of the Regional Seismology Centre for South America (CERESIS) is relevant: it has strengthened and expanded cooperation among countries and their scientific and technical organizations. A more recent instance is that of the Coordination Centre for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America (CEPREDENAC), which, thanks to Scandinavian cooperation, has looked at the entire process of disaster reduction, involving scientific and technical institutions and disaster prevention and relief bodies from every country in Central America, promoting institutional development, horizontal cooperation and scientific and

technological transfer with more developed cooperating countries. In recent years there has been a notable growth in national centres enjoying Japanese support which cover the region, in Peru (CISMID: Centre for Seismic Research to Mitigate Disasters), and Mexico (CENAPRED: National Disaster Prevention Centre). In conjunction with the UNESCO regional earth sciences programme and with participation from various national organizations it has thus been possible to establish an increasingly formal network of cooperation and scientific and technological transfer in the region. One notable development has been the recent creation of a regional group of social science researchers for disaster prevention (LA RED), supplementing a nucleus of research in physical and social fields which has been needed to give a steadily fuller picture to planners, politicians and decision-makers and to the most vulnerable communities.

The strengthening or establishment of regional documentation centres supporting all disciplines, incorporating such communication media as electronic mail to facilitate information transfers and communications between earth science institutions and their researchers and users, is to be recommended.

Horizontal cooperation between Latin American countries and between institutions in developed and developing countries should continue to be strengthened in order to facilitate transfers of science and technology, pool experiences and establish early-warning systems in order to save lives, making use of the land in ways that exploit its comparative advantages while reducing the vulnerability of the human population and its works.

Presenter: Mr. Ciro Ugarte Casafranca

Topic: The health sector: from preparation to prevention

HEALTH IS NOT JUST MEDICINE

Health is considered to be a state of complete physical, medical and social well-being, not just the absence of afflictions or diseases. The WHO slogan "Health for All by the Year 2000" chimes with efforts to reduce natural disasters in order to secure greater well-being for mankind.

LEADERSHIP OF REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS EFFORTS

Until the earthquakes in Peru (1970) and Guatemala (1976), responses by the health sector used to be unplanned and carried out without prior training. Thereafter, the ministries of health of the Americas agreed to give priority to preparing their sector to cope with disasters: the "relief only" stage was past.

Technical documents on dealing with disasters were drawn up. Training and sectoral planning made it possible to cope technically with health activities during disasters, and has clearly influenced other sectors.

COOPERATION BETWEEN COUNTRIES

The ministers of health of the Central American countries, the Andean area (Hipólito Unánue Convention) and southern Latin America meet periodically. The topic of "disasters" is given priority at such meetings, and joint programmes of action are drawn up.

There are yearly meetings of national experts on emergencies and disasters. In many cases, civil defence, foreign relations, planning and parliamentary officials also take part, improving cooperation between countries.

ACTIVE AND COORDINATED PREVENTION AND MITIGATION

Between 1985 and 1986, during the earthquakes in Chile, Mexico and El Salvador, the health services responded appropriately thanks to prior preparations. Patients, doctors and nurses did die, however, when trapped as hospitals collapsed, and hospital infrastructure and equipment suffered severe damage.

Experts from the region met with a view to reducing the effects of disasters on hospitals. Disaster reduction guides and manuals were drawn up in a coordinated manner, promoting the application of uniform standards.

On the International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction, under the slogan "Disaster prevention in schools and hospitals", the countries of the region agreed to produce and distribute widely written, pictorial and video information, to hold meetings at the highest political and technical levels, and to stage training exercises at hospitals and schools.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Health, as a basic necessity, nowadays presents fewer problems and has enabled cooperation over disasters among Latin American countries to become more fluid and productive.

2. As disaster reduction does not completely eliminate damage, the Decade should lay special emphasis on disaster preparedness.

3. A regional conference on disaster mitigation in hospitals, involving countries, donor agencies and international organizations, needs to be held. Such a conference would help to secure the political backing essential for more solid health services.

4. Cooperation between countries depends on close, "uncensored" contacts between the individuals responsible. Hence, modern electronic networks need to be set up to permit contacts between countries and among their institutions.

Presenter: Mr. Omar Dario Cardona Arbolida

Disasters are nothing more than the materialization of risks which depend not only on some disrupting or triggering factor - in this case a natural or

technological phenomenon - but on a degree of vulnerability that favours the occurrence of a crisis. Such social and environmental conditions are generally the result of the kinds of development pursued and the debt accumulated with nature, which in turn incubates or gestates within society. In other words, disasters are unresolved development problems which should be analysed from an economic viewpoint, not simply as facts of nature to be explained in purely technical terms. Vulnerability in its various forms is nothing more than a shortfall in development, an overdrawn environmental account, to which preventive management and planning efforts should be directed in order to reduce or avert the social, economic and environmental consequences.

These are among the conclusions reached by government representatives in the Americas and by regional and subregional governmental and non-governmental organizations, institutions and bodies, professionals, professors and researchers at public and private institutions who met for the Inter-American Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in late March.

The recommendations set out by participants in the Cartagena Declaration were: developing techniques for monitoring and tracking vulnerability as it builds up, geographically and socially; involving communities and stressing their participation; conducting studies of disasters which combine social with technical and scientific aspects and civilian society with government bodies; pressing to have educational curricula make prevention a part of the culture; establishing networks of institutions and documentation centres; strengthening organizational and administrative systems concerned with disaster prevention and relief in the light of decentralization and public participation; emphasizing prevention, not just emergency relief; promoting horizontal cooperation by international bodies; and the introduction and application by global and regional financial institutions of financing policies that support disaster prevention and mitigation initiatives in the region.

The first of an exchange of experiences and views on the opportunity provided by IDNDR, not only to attract the interest of scientists and technologists but to create the necessary political and administrative will and secure community acceptance of the notion of disaster reduction, the Cartagena Declaration indicates, in brief, that reducing vulnerability should be made an explicit part of planning for sustainable development.